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Climate Change and Affordable Housing: Time to Make a Strong Connection

By Casey Mills

[BeyondChron](#)

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There's no question the issue of climate change has reached a tipping point in America. Once relegated to technical journals and PBS documentaries, the national news media now splashes climate change issues across front pages and news broadcasts daily. States and cities throughout the country have begun their own initiatives to combat the problem, and the new Democratic-controlled House and Senate look poised to push the dialogue even further. One strategy in particular - increasing density in cities to combat sprawl - has enjoyed increasing popularity, and governments everywhere are pursuing it aggressively.

However, while people have flocked to downtowns across America, many low-income and working class residents have been forced out, causing the exact type of sprawl densification was intended to combat. As the country lays the groundwork for how it talks about climate change from now on, housing advocates need to ensure affordable housing becomes an essential component of any plan for tackling the issue.

Despite the media focusing largely on climate change strategies like ethanol and composting, combating sprawl appears to be one of the efforts offering the most bang for the buck. For starters, cars produce almost a third of the carbon emitted in America. Allowing people to live close to their jobs, grocery stores, parks and schools means dramatically shortened commute times and significantly reduced carbon emissions.

In addition, increasing density means taking advantage of public infrastructure already in place. Rather than extending sewer, water, road and electric systems farther and farther away from the city center, using the already existing systems increases their efficiency and reduces the need for more resources to expand them.

Many cities have launched anti-sprawl initiatives, establishing growth boundaries and working to make their downtowns livable places where individuals and families would want to live. It's been an uphill battle, as city leaders faced years of neglect sparked by massive out-migration over the last 50 years to suburbs that kept expanding further and further outwards. But many cities have been extremely successful, and an increasing number of people have realized the benefits, such as reduced travel time, more cultural experiences, and strong sense of community, that moving to a city can bring.

However, for all the great work cities and sustainability advocates have done to increase density, it seems they've often forgotten one crucial element in their efforts - providing enough affordable housing.

As demand increases for urban housing, costs go up, often dramatically in many places in recent years. While cities may have won the battle in bringing people in, they've also succeeded in forcing people out. Low-income and working-class people in cities like San Francisco, Seattle, Boston and New York keep moving farther and farther away from their jobs, making sprawl worse, not better.

There is simply no way to eliminate the need for low-income service and working-class jobs in urban centers. As more people arrive, more baristas, bus drivers, nurses, policemen and bellboys are needed. It's a simple outgrowth of supply and demand economics - but it's a trend many cities have failed to account for.

It would be nice to think that all these folks forced out of cities would simply take public transit to work. But even areas around transit stations in outlying areas find their housing costs skyrocketing, meaning many low-wage and working class workers find themselves forced into a situation where they must drive to work and to services. This not only has impacts on sustainability; it also means it's harder for these folks to make ends meet, as substantial portions of their income goes towards gas, auto insurance and repairs.

An innumerable number of strategies exist that cities can employ to provide affordable housing, but all of them require strong political will. As climate change becomes one of the dominant national issues - one that will only grow in importance as the effects of climate change begin to reveal themselves - it's important to insure affordable housing becomes an inherent part of the dialogue.

A disturbing trend already underway involves sustainability and 'green' advocates aligning with developers to promote density above all other considerations. Requiring developers to contribute towards affordable housing, for example, simply represents a roadblock to the more important overall goal - bringing more housing downtown. If affordable housing becomes viewed as a necessary component of sustainability, not a roadblock to it, this sort of alliance would be impossible to maintain.

Of course, making affordable housing a crucial component of sustainability also means the reverse must occur - affordable housing providers must renew their commitment to building in areas well served by transit and other services, green building techniques, and other strategies for combating climate change.

The payoff in doing so, however, is well worth it. Climate change looks to be the issue of our day. As such, it becomes increasingly vital for affordable housing advocates to ensure that as the country moves to address the problem, housing for low-income and working class people becomes a central part of the solution.